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Susan Estrich: Henry Waxman, a Small Man with a Giant Impact

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By Susan Estrich



My congressman has decided not to run for re-election. He's hardly unique in that respect: News accounts covering his decision describe his announcement as one more in a "wave" of retirements.

What makes it unique is that, like him or not, [Rep. Henry Waxman](#), D-Calif. — who is all of 5 feet 5 inches tall — has long been considered one of the giants of the [House of Representatives](#). Unlike so many members who, for entirely understandable reasons, have very little to show in terms of legislation from their years of service (or attempted service), Waxman has been all over the major issues of the past four decades.

Those food labels that we now take for granted? Henry Waxman. That famous moment when the heads of the cigarette companies denied any link to cancer? Henry Waxman. Regulation of pesticides in food? Henry Waxman. Regulation of nursing homes? Henry Waxman. Tougher clean air regulation? Research money for rare diseases? Henry Waxman. I could go on and on. There are few members of [Congress](#) who have as much to show for their years in Washington.

So why leave now?

Waxman says he's retiring because, at 74, if he is to have another chapter, after 40 years in the House, now is the time. Fair enough.

But he also made clear that while he believed he could have been re-elected (certainly true), he would have spent the next 10 months dialing for dollars. He singled out the “partisan intellectual vacuum” in which Congress operates. He said he was “embarrassed” that the “greatest legislative body in the world” ignores science and facts in the service of extremism.

Embarrassed.

He’s right about that.

I have voted for Waxman every two years for the past two decades. I always felt good marking my ballot. I was voting for a guy who is the real deal. A man who cares deeply about policy. A man who lives his values, fights for what he believes in with grit and passion. No Hollywood cover guy he. Henry Waxman is not one of the tallest, but he is one of the giants.

And who will replace him? Who will, a year from now, take his seat, minus the seniority, minus the experience and savvy, minus, I fear, the guts and determination and raw intellectual power that allowed Henry Waxman to make change happen?

There will be a line. They will compete for dollars. My inbox will be full of invitations to fundraisers I won’t attend. The celebrities will be courted. Maybe one of them will run. The race will cost a fortune. There will not be a dime’s worth of difference between the candidates on the issues in this bluest of blue districts, but will any of them be able to accomplish a tenth of what Henry has?

No.

So what do you say when a giant steps aside?

Just this: Thank you.

— [Susan Estrich](#) is a best-selling author, the Robert Kingsley Professor of Law and Political Science at the [USC Law Center](#) and was campaign manager for 1988 Democratic presidential nominee [Michael Dukakis](#). [Click here to contact her](#) or [click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are her own.

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